By

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After the death of Mu'awiyyah, his son Yazid became Caliph. He ignored his father's death-bed advice and ordered his Governor of Madinah – Walid b. Utbah - to either force a pledge of allegiance from Husayn or send his head to Damascus. His rule was to be by bribery, coercion, threats and force.

In Shaban 680/60 Husayn assembled a caravan to take his family out of Madinah to sanctuary in Makkah. The people of Madinah were aware of the Prophet's (pbuh) forecast that one day Husayn would leave Madinah with his entire family, never to return. Despite their anxiety, they were only told that the family was leaving for *Hajj*, and after that for an unknown destination to arrange the marriage of Ali Akbar (the son of Husayn's wife Layla bint Abu Murrah b. Urwah b. Mas'ud of Taif, one of those reared by Husayn's sister Zaynab) to a princess. Hasan's eight-year-old daughter Fatimah was left behind with Umm Banin (Ali's widow, who with her sons (eldest son Abbas) had lived with Husayn since Ali's death – which occurred when Abbas was 12) and her sister Umm Salamah. The child had a premonition that she would die while they were away, and asked Ali Akbar to be sure to fetch his bride and pray at her grave. Umm Banin warned her sons that if Husayn or any of his loved ones got hurt while they still lived, she would never forgive them.

They left Madinah on 4th Rajab, reached Makkah on 4th Shaban, and stayed there in sanctuary for four months until the *Hajj* season. Meanwhile, Numan b. Bashir (the first Ansar baby to have been born in Madinah after the *hijrah*) who had been Ali's Governor of Kufah, was replaced by Yazid's man, Ubaydallah b. Ziyad. However, the people of Kufah were loyal to Husayn, and informed him that some of the 'pilgrims' were coming specifically to kill him. They invited Husayn to come to them in Kufah. Husayn therefore sent his cousin Muslim b. Aqil in advance to be his representative, along with Mukhtar b. Abu Ubayd b. Mas'ud ath-Thaqafi and Hani b. Urwah.

Ibn Aqil had married Husayn's half-sister Ruqaiyyah (bint Umm Habibah bint Rabi'ah), and they had four children – Abdullah (now aged 15), Muhammad (aged 10), Ibrahim (aged 8) and Ruqaiyyah (aged 5-6). Muhammad and Ibrahim went with him to Kufah.

Yazid's man Ibn Ziyad soon had Ibn Aqil and the other agents killed – they were hurled from a rooftop. (Mukhtar survived, to avenge the murder of Husayn at Karbala by seizing power in Kufah in 685-7/66-7). Their corpses were dragged through the streets, and the city and surroundings placed under observation. Ibn Aqil's two young sons Muhammad and Ibrahim were imprisoned. (After the battle of Karbala they managed to escape and were hidden by a woman, but unfortunately, her husband worked for Ibn Ziyad and when he discovered them, he killed them).

Meanwhile Husayn, still in Makkah, did not wish the holy shrine to become the scene of battle, so decided to leave on 8th Dhu'l Hijjah without waiting to perform the *Hajj* rites.

He set out with his family, realising that he stood little chance of escape. It was the season of blistering heat, and a journey of some 1,100 miles, and there were around 50 children in the caravan. Zaynab begged her husband Abdullah b. Jafar for permission to go with them. Ibn Jafar himself was too ill to travel and stayed behind while she took her son Awn (aged c13) and her stepson Muhammad (aged c.11).

Husayn was soon told about the death of his cousin Muslim b. Aqil. He sent Zaynab to console his half-sister Ruqaiyyah and her little daughter Ruqaiyyah, the great playmate of his own four-year-old daughter Ruqaiyyah (who was usually called Sakinah or Sukaynah).[1]

Long before they reached Kufah they were confronted by 1,000 horsemen under Yazid's commander Hur al-Riyahi who informed Husayn they had been ordered not to let him enter Kufah unless he gave allegiance to Yazid. If Husayn refused, Hur was commissioned to take them to meet Ibn Ziyad at another place. Hur and his troops were suffering from thirst. Husayn agreed to meet Ibn Ziyad, gave them all water, and turned his caravan according to Hur's instructions – but they found they had been directed to a place without vegetation or water, where another army under Umar b. Sa'd appeared and

forced them to halt. The place was a desert called Karbala, some 70 miles from Kufah. It was 2^{nd} Muharram, 61.

Husayn and his people set up camp and were instantly hemmed in by the huge army. On the 4th Muharram Zaynab grew alarmed and asked her brother why all these soldiers were massing. He told her they had come to kill him. 'But we are barely 72 men while they are in thousands. Isn't there anyone who can help us?' she cried. 'Falsehood can buy many supporters,' Husayn said, 'but truth has few friends.'

As it happened, both commanders Hur and Umar b. Sa'd were impressed with Husayn and even joined the prayers with him. Husayn had virtually persuaded them to lift the siege and let them leave Iraq when the furious Ibn Ziyad sent Shimr b. Dhiljawshan to order Umar to either commence fighting or be relieved of his position and beheaded. Shimr/Shimar, was actually the nephew of Ali's wife Umm Banin bint Hizam b. Khalid b. Darim, and as her four sons, Abbas, Jafar, Uthman and Abdullah, were at this very moment with Husayn facing death he begged the Governor's pardon for them, and obtained it. His relatives responded by cursing him and his pardon and refused to abandon Husayn.

On 7th Muharram Ibn Ziyad's army moved in closer. Amr b. Hajjaj commanded the right flank of Umar's army, and Shimr the left flank. Husayn's people were in sight of the river Euphrates, but Caliph Yazid's army deployed a picket of 500 men to cut off their access to the water. They hoped this would force Husayn to negotiate an unconditional surrender. Husayn refused to give way, even though he knew he was staring death in the face. Husayn gave leave to all who wished to abandon him, turning out the lights so that those who wished to could slip away without embarrassment. Some 40 remained with him, vowing to defend him to their last drop of blood.

He ordered the digging of a trench enclosing the rear of the tents, and filled it with firewood ready to defend themselves with fire.

On the 9th Muharram, Ibn Ziyad's forces closed in on the camp, and Husayn asked his half-brother Abbas to go to Umar b. Sa'd and request delay of the battle by one more night. They agreed. That night Husayn freed all who were slaves, and gave his companions a further chance to leave him. 'I have not known better and more faithful companions than my own, or better and more loving relatives than my own. May Allah

give you all a goodly reward. Tomorrow is going to be the fateful day for me and my enemies. The enemy is only interested in me. I gladly permit each one of you to leave - I will not have the least complaint against anyone. Darkness is coming on. Avail yourselves of it, and make good your escape.' They cried that they would either live with him or die with him, even sixteen of the freed slaves. One of these was John b. Huwai, who had first been the slave of Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, then Ali, then Hasan and finally Husayn - now an old man with grey curly hair.

Zaynab ran to Husayn and threw her arms round his neck weeping. 'Dear sister,' he cried, 'Do not let the devil snatch away your patience and dignity.' 'How can you leave me alone? It is breaking my heart.' She fell in a swoon, and they sprinkled water on her face. 'Dear sister, remember Allah and get peace of mind from Him. All living things have to die – nothing in the universe will live for ever. The Messenger (pbuh) was a model of virtue for me and for every other Muslim. Learn from his example how to be patient and calm. I implore you, do not cry out or tear your hair or clothing after I am dead.' She then asked if she could die in his place, and he told her it was not possible.

He also warned her that it was time to get his little daughter Sakinah used to going to sleep without his being there. Sakinah would never settle down unless it was in his arms, and when she had drifted off he would carry her to Zaynab or Rubab. This would soon be no more.

He asked Zaynab to go to the tent of his son Ali Zayn al-Abidin, who was lying on a sheepskin raging with fever, commending him to them as the next Imam. Then he retired to his own tent where he spent the rest of the night in prayer. (Ali Zayn al-Abidin was known as 'Ibn al-Khiyaratayn' – 'the son of the best two', meaning the two lines of the Quraysh and the Persian royalty).

One source stated that Husayn's wife Rabab bint Imru'l Qays went into labour in the tent that night – but other versions suggest that her baby, Ali Asghar (Abdullah), was six months old at Karbala. Either way, Husayn spent his last night with one of his tiniest children.

In the morning, the truce was over. Zaynab heard the enemy battle cries and ran to Husayn's tent where she found he had fallen asleep sitting, while polishing his sword. He

woke, and told her he had just had a dream in which he had seen his dead loved ones, who told him he would soon be with them.

He expected few to stand and face death with him, but to his surprise, on the 10th Muharram 61-2/680 his support had increased to 31 horsemen and 40 footsoldiers, some having joined him from Yazid's army – but they were still hopelessly outnumbered. (Some put the enemy army at 5,000, others at 30,000!). Many were already dying from thirst.

Husayn put on his grandfather's (pbuh) cloak and turban, took up the famous double-bladed sword *Dhu'l fiqar*, and prepared to die. He saw Umar b. Sa'd mobilising his troops. Suddenly the enemy commander Hur, his son and his manservant — who had listened to the children crying all night from thirst - deserted Ibn Ziyad's force and rushed to join Husayn's people.

Fierce fighting soon followed, and within an hour - by noon - most of Husayn's followers had been slain. The trench was fired to serve as a back buffer between the two armies, and at least one of the enemy (Ibn Hawdha) died in it. At the time for mid-day prayer Husayn called the *adhan* for his survivors (15 warriors and 18 members of his family), but the enemy army ignored this and carried on shooting. As Husayn led the worship two warriors stepped forward to use their bodies to shield Husayn from the arrows. When the prayer ended it was said that one had 38 arrows in him, and the other 52.

Hur (whose name meant 'freedom') died in Husayn's arms.

The first woman killed was the wife of Wahhab b. Abdullah al-Kalbi, who went to sit by the body of her slain husband and was bludgeoned to death by Shimr's servant. Even children fought. One eleven-year-old boy was Amr b. Junadah al-Ansari. He was killed and his head cut off and hurled into the camp, whereupon his mother got up and threw it back, seized a tent-pole and went out to fight to the death herself.

Shimr then threatened to burn Husayn's tent while his family was still inside it.

Abbas' three brothers were killed shortly after the noon prayer.

Zaynab's sons Awn (c.13) and Muhammad (c.11), who had been trained to fight by Abbas, had been refused permission to go out and attempt single combats – until Zaynab reminded Husayn how Abbas had saved his life at the battle of Siffin when he was only eight years old. They were then allowed to go, and impressed Umar b. Sa'd with their valour, but both were soon killed. When she saw their bodies, Zaynab refused to mourn although the whole camp was in tears. 'I will not lament for you,' she said. 'You have gone in the way of the Lord. Let not my brother feel that I am sorry for losing them – today I am very pleased with my children.'

Next to go was Ruqaiyyah bint Ali's son Abdullah b. Muslim (b. Aqil b. Abu Talib), then Hasan's sons by Umm Farwah – Abdullah, Umar and Qasim. Qasim was a young boy of about 14. Umm Farwah had been saving Hasan's special wedding garment for Qasim's future wedding day. Knowing now that he would not live to marry, she dressed him in it before kissing him farewell. Qasim fought until his sandal broke and as he bent to fix it he was knocked down. He cried out for his uncle. Husayn tried to rescue him, but the boy's arm was struck off and then he was trampled by the horses, his body torn to pieces. When the horses left, Husayn managed to gather up the pieces of his body in his garment and rode back to the tents, where he asked the faithful maidservant Fiddah to care for his mother and other loved ones.

Soon there were only four men left - Husayn, Ali Akbar, Abbas and Ali Zayn al-Abidin. Ali Zayn al-Abidin, the son of the Persian princess, had not been able to fight because he was so ill with virulent fever that he could not stand up. Little Sakinah, who particularly loved Husayn's half-brother Abbas, went to him begging for water. Abbas, who had successfully made previous attempts to get water from the Euphrates, made a dash to try to get more for the children and even managed to fill a skin, but was attacked and overwhelmed. He lost both arms, and took an arrow in the eye. Husayn reached him, but Abbas begged him to go back and take care of Sakinah for him, and not carry back his body in case she saw it and was too upset. When Sakinah saw blood on the water-skin and knew what it meant. She prayed desperately that he would not die, and she would never ask for water again, but to no avail. He had joined the martyrs.

Now it was the turn of Ali Akbar (Abu'l Husayn), Husayn's eighteen-year-old son by his wife Layla bint Abu Murrah, the grand-daughter of Urwah b. Mas'ud of Taif. Ali

Akbar was one of those who most closely resembled the Prophet (pbuh) in looks, and was very much loved by his aunt Zaynab who had cherished him alongside her own sons. He had been prevented from going to the battlefield by those who wished to preserve his life, but now he forced his father to give permission. He did not wish it to be said that he had been spared until all his brothers and nephews were killed. His mother Layla fainted in his arms when she embraced him, and he passed her to the care of Zaynab.

Husayn put the Prophet's (pbuh) turban on him, and as he mounted his horse little Sakinah clung to him and begged him not to go. He kissed her farewell, advanced to the enemy, and gave an impassioned speech to try to end the fighting. The enemy also tried to win him over, since his mother Layla was also the grand-daughter of Maymunah bint Abu Sufyan and therefore a close relative of Yazid, but he dismissed the idea of any amnesty for himself with contempt. He fought several single combats, and then managed to get back to Husayn's camp, where he refused to drink himself while they did not drink, and said farewell to his family. The second time he went out he was mortally wounded, lanced in the back and a sword-blow splitting his head. He clung to his horse, but as it went back to the camp the troops surrounded him and he was cut down. Husayn heard his cry and rushed out to find him, and he died in his father's arms. They carried him back to the camp, where Zaynab ran out and threw herself on his body. Husayn pulled her back and placed his corpse in front of his tent, where it was said that the tears of his mother Layla and the other womenfolk literally washed the blood from him.

The baby Ali Asghar was crying, desperately dehydrated, and Zaynab pleaded with Husayn to try to beg some water for him. Surely they would not harm the baby? Rabab dressed him in clean clothes and put a little turban on him, and Husayn took him outside the tent in his arms. (The source which said he was newborn related that Husayn named him Abdullah at this point, and whispered the *adhan* for him). His pleas were scorned, and an arrow fired through the baby's neck by the expert archer Hurmala (Hurmillah) pinned him to Husayn's chest. Unable to do anything but support the baby, he stumbled back to his camp. He handed the tiny corpse to Zaynab, then he and Rabab buried their baby.

Husayn realised there was no longer any hope. Only he and Ali Zayn remained. Ali Zayn tried to rouse himself, but was too ill. Husayn's last request to him was to send his farewell greeting to the eight-year-old Fatimah they had left in Madinah, and to ask their friends to remember him whenever they drank water. His very last request was for Zaynab to give him ragged underwear and torn trousers, so that his corpse would not be stripped leaving his private parts exposed. Zaynab brought his horse to mount, but his

departure was delayed by little Sakinah clinging to its leg and begging the horse not to take her father away and leave her an orphan.

He reminded her that she was the great-grand-daughter of the Prophet (pbuh), and how could they face him if he did not go? Then he charged desperately into the enemy troops, begging that they would spare his womenfolk, and Shimr did agree. Amazingly, Husayn managed to fight his way to the Euphrates. As he tried to sip a drink, someone taunted him that he was refreshing himself while his family was being violated, so he threw down the water and managed to get back to his tent, where he was surrounded. He picked up the crying Sakinah while the enemy rained down a thick hail of arrows, some piercing the tent-ropes and the women's garments.

Husayn got to his horse, but was completely helpless from his own wounds. He was hit in the shoulder, the mouth, collarbone, chest, throat and loin.

Soon, a sword-blow gashed his skull, and he was brought to the ground. His elevenyear old nephew Abdullah b. Hasan ran out waving a stick at the soldier. 'O son of an unclean wretch!' he cried. 'Will you kill my uncle?' The soldier, Malik, cut the boy's hand off. Husayn tried to hold him, and Zaynab ran out to join them, but an arrow finished the boy off while he was in his uncle's arms.

Muhammad b. Abu Sa'id, the young grandson of Aqil b. Abu Talib, was killed as a rider closed in and smashed his skull.

Then, there was a lull, for everyone hesitated to be the slayer of the Prophet's (pbuh) beloved grandson Husayn, and nobody came forward. Shimr howled at the troops to make them get on with it and finish him off. 'Shame on you! Why are you hanging back? Kill him, may your mothers be deprived of you!' he shouted.

Husayn's devoted horse trampled and kicked, and when the soldiers let it alone it came and nosed Husayn, staining its forehead with blood before going back to Husayn's tent. When the women saw the blood they unveiled their faces and hair, and came out crying. Zaynab took her brother in her arms and cursed the enemy who stood watching him die.

In the end, it was Shimr himself who came and kicked him, sat on his chest, held him by the beard and stabbed him 12 times before beheading him.[2] His body was instantly plundered as he had feared – Bahr b. Ka'b took his trousers, Qays b. Ashath took his cloak, Aswad al-Awdi took his sandals and one of the Banu Nahshal b. Darim took his sword (which later came into the possession of the family of Habib b. Budayl). Umar b. Sa'd called for volunteers to ride back and forth trampling Husayn's body under the hooves of their horses, and some ten did so (it was even suggested that they reshod their horses first), until his back and chest were completely crushed.

Zaynab howled: 'O Muhammad! O Muhammad! Here is Husayn in the open, stained with blood and with limbs torn off. O Muhammad! Your daughters are prisoners, your progeny are slain, and the east wind blows dust over them!' She rushed back to tell Ali Zayn that his father was dead, and held back the tent flap so that he could see. He told her to prepare the other women and children for their inevitable fate.

Shimr led the men in plundering his *haram*, looting what they could. The women, who were completely covered, even their faces, were beaten and their veils ripped off, and their clothing pulled from their backs. Sakinah and Fatimah (Sukaynah) both wore earrings. Fatimah/Sukaynah's were wrenched off, making her ears bleed. When Sakinah struggled to keep her veil on, she was punched.

Meanwhile, they thought the unconscious Ali Zayn was dead, but when his bedding was pulled out from beneath him and he was rolled to the floor, Shimr realised he was still alive. He came to kill him, but Zaynab threw herself over him and to everyone's surprise Shimr's own men prevented him.

Then the tents were set on fire, and Sakinah ran out with her clothes ablaze. One of the enemy soldiers (Hunayd b. Muslim) put out the flames. When he picked up the child she surprised him by asking if he could tell her where Najaf was. He asked why, and she said she wanted to go there to complain to her grandfather about what had happened. He took her back to Zaynab.

As night fell, Zaynab went out and collected up all the children who had scattered into the open to the space between the gutted tents, the night known as *sham-e gareeba*,

'the night of the homeless'. She found them all except Sakinah. Zaynab cried out in her grief, and it was said that she heard the voice of Husayn telling her that the child was with him – and indeed that was where they found her, asleep and clinging to her dead father's headless and mangled body.

Suddenly they saw more people with torches approaching, and assuming they were looters Zaynab made ready to beg them not to disturb the children who had at last managed to sleep. It was not soldiers but some of their wives, led by the widow of Hur, who had brought them food and water. She told them that Amr b. Sa'd had only allowed it as he wished to keep them alive to take them captive to Yazid!

The bodies of the martyrs were all decapitated and their heads stuck on spears to be paraded. Their bodies were left unburied for three days. 72 men had died trying to save Husayn, including 18 of the Prophet's (pbuh) own family. Among the dead were some seventeen teenagers, and Husayn's five-year-old son Jafar. There were also the sixteen slaves or freed slaves, mostly from Abyssinia.

The women and children, Ali Zayn al-Abidin and his four-year-old son Muhammad al-Baqir (or Abu Jafar, the son of Umm Abdullah, the daughter of his brother Hasan) were taken as captives to Kufah, made to walk first past the naked bodies of their martyrs still lying on the battlefield even after the enemy had buried their own dead. They were made to ride on camels without saddles with their faces unveiled, behind the heads of their menfolk impaled on spears.

Zaynab briefly became the leader of the Shi'at Ali, and the guardian of the orphans of *Ahl al-Bayt*.

Thus Ali Zayn al-Abidin b. Husayn became the Fourth Imam, and his son Muhammad al-Baqir was the Fifth.

Hasan Muthannah, a son of Hasan b. Ali, also survived. He was seriously wounded and found lying among the dead. A general interceded for him and he was not slain, but taken to Kufah. (He married Husayn's daughter Fatimah).

The people of Kufah were told that the Muslims had achieved victory against a rebel tribe, and were to prepare a celebration, but the triumphant music in the marketplace soon changed to shocked silence broken only by weeping when the people saw what had really happened. They lowered their eyes and would not look at the Prophet's (pbuh) women; someone ran to fetch veils for them, but they were snatched away. Zaynab gave a passionate public speech, reprimanding them for allowing the death of their Imam.

In the audience hall of the Governor's palace she faced up to Ibn Ziyad. When he saw the young man Ali Zayn he was furious that he was still alive, and gave orders for him to be beheaded. Zaynab rushed forward and clutched him in her arms. 'You will have to kill me before you touch my brother's only surviving son!' she raged. He was spared.

The martyrs' heads and the captives were then sent to Caliph Yazid in Damascus, over 600 miles away, a journey which was to take them 28 days. As they went from town to town the defiant Zaynab made such impassioned speeches that high feelings were aroused and much sympathy for the Prophet's (pbuh) descendants.

When Yazid was presented with Husayn's head on a gold dish he started to poke his lips and teeth with a stick, to the disgust of the venerable Companion Zayd b. Arqam. 'Take your cane from those lips,' he cried, 'for by Allah, I have seen the lips of the Prophet (pbuh) kiss those lips!'. 'May God make your eyes weep!' sneered Yazid. 'By God, if it were not for the fact that you are an old man who has gone senile and your mind has left you, I would cut off *your* head!' Zayd walked out of the court. Again Zaynab spoke out defiantly, in defence of those lips the Prophet (pbuh) used to kiss.

A Syrian asked to be given Fatimah, who clung to Zaynab weeping, and she cursed him. Yazid might have killed her but she was defended by Abdullah b. Umar b. al-As. However, she begged Yazid to kill her too if he killed Ali Zayn. They were moved to a prison open to the sky – hot like an oven by day and so cold at night that they could not sleep.

Little Sakinah (Ruqaiyyah) was never seen to smile again. She could not sleep. She said she could hear a baby crying, and kept asking if it was her baby brother Ali Asghar. On the night of 5th Rabi al-Awwal Sakinah lay down on the prison floor, her eyes wide

and staring at the wall. When they tried to wake her for the dawn prayer she was found dead. Ali Zayn al-Abidin dug her grave in the cell, and there she was buried while her mother shrieked in grief. Her grave exists to this day.[3] Zaynab took her earrings, intending to place them on Husayn's grave one day, if it became possible.

When Yazid's wife found out the truth of what had happened she could not believe it – she and all her ladies called on Husayn's family and did their best to console them. In the end Yazid was so ashamed he felt obliged to publicly disown his agents and condemn them, and gave orders for Husayn's head to be taken back to where his body lay, at Karbala, to be buried with it. Yazid then allotted Husayn's surviving family a house adjoining the palace, and compensated them for the plunder.

The infamous Shimr tried to escape but was butchered and his dead body fed to dogs. Eventually, to conciliate public opinion, Husayn's survivors were all sent back to Madinah, escorted by Numan b. Bashir. At Karbala, Husayn's body was disinterred and his head was piously buried with it. The widow Rabab would not leave the grave and remained there for a whole year. Zaynab also wished to be left there, and would have stayed until she died, but Ali Zayn over-ruled her and she was made to continue with them.

When they got near to Madinah they entered on foot, carrying black flags, and went first to the Prophet's (pbuh) grave to pray, before being reunited with Umm Banin, Fatimah and her sister. Zaynab's hair had turned white as snow. Although she was reunited with her husband (Abdullah b. Jafar), she did not live long after the tortuous trials she had suffered. The exact date and place of her death is not clear but it is probable that she died on 16th Dhu'l Hijjah in the year 62, some six months after her return. Rabab also eventually returned to Madinah and died there.

Later, Ali Zayn was arrested again and sent back in chains to Damascus, but then again returned to Madinah, where he retired from public life and spent his remaining life in worship.

- [1] This is not the same Sukaynah as the grand-daughter of Fatimah and Ali who became famous as one of the two 'pearls of the Quraysh', the other 'pearl' being Aishah's niece Aishah bint Talhah by Aishah's half-sister Umm Kulthum. That Sukaynah's real name was Fatimah bint Husayn.
- [2] Another source states he was speared by Sinan b. Anas b. Amr al-Nakha'l, who also cut off his head.
- [3] In fact, she has two burial places one where she died and was first buried, and then some centuries later she was disinterred due to the dream of a man of Damascus that her grave was being flooded with water. On investigation it turned out to be so, and her body as fresh as if she had just been buried was moved to a site near the palace of Yazid and reburied, the grave that is shown to pilgrims to this day (Shi'a News Website).